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September 3, 2003  
Immediate Release

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## **Environment Department Issues Raw Shellfish Advisory**

(Santa Fe, NM) — The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) is issuing a consumer advisory to individuals with weakened immune systems about the risks associated with consuming raw shellfish, particularly raw oysters. A Santa Fe resident was admitted to the hospital last month after eating raw oysters. The patient is still in the ICU after more than a week in the hospital.

Oysters, the most commonly eaten raw shellfish, as well as other types of seafood, may contain bacteria called *Vibrio vulnificus*, a naturally occurring organism found in warm coastal waters such as the Gulf of Mexico. *Vibrio vulnificus* levels are commonly elevated in these waters during the warmer months.

Symptoms of the illness caused by *Vibrio vulnificus* bacteria usually occur within 24-48 hours after ingestion and may include fever/chills, skin lesions, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and/or decreased blood pressure (septic shock). If you experience any of these symptoms after consuming raw shellfish, seek medical attention immediately.

Serious cases of the illness have a death rate of greater than 50 percent. Nationwide, between 1998 and August 2002 there were 99 illnesses and 52 deaths attributed to *Vibrio vulnificus* bacteria. While no New Mexico deaths have yet been linked to the bacteria, an Oklahoma man died of *Vibrio vulnificus* in May after eating raw oysters.

Individuals at risk include those who have chronic liver disease (including hepatitis, cirrhosis, or alcoholism), hemochromatosis, diabetes, cancer, stomach disorders, weakened immune systems from illness or medical treatment, and those who take prescribed medication to decrease stomach acid levels. If you are unsure of your risk, please consult a physician. Healthy individuals are not at risk of serious infection.

You can avoid illness by consuming shellfish that have been thoroughly cooked or, if raw, treated by a Post-Harvest Processing treatment. Serving restaurants and grocery stores can tell you if the product they sell has been treated to significantly reduce the *Vibrio* bacteria (to non-detectable levels).

For additional information contact the U.S. Centers for Disease Control Web site: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) (click on "health topics A - Z", "v", "*Vibrio vulnificus*"), the U.S. Food and Drug Administration Food Safety Hotline: 1-888-723-3366, or Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, NMED at (505) 827-0314.

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